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Review of "Demons of Urban Reform: Early European Witch Trials and Criminal Justice, 1430-1530"

Abstract

It's interesting, fascinating, and even entertaining. The book is clearly directed to a broader audience—including, certainly, the burgeoning yoga market—but scholars, while familiar with the figures and issues in Syman's book, would also find it interesting, if lacking the depth of typical scholarly studies

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Comments

This article is published as Laura Stokes, Demons of Urban Reform: Early European Witch Trials and Criminal Justice, 1430-1530, reviewed in Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religion 16 (2012): 110-11. doi: [10.1525/nr.2012.16.2.110](https://doi.org/10.1525/nr.2012.16.2.110) . Posted with permission.



Review: Review

Reviewed Work(s): Demons of Urban Reform: Early European Witch Trials and Criminal Justice, 1430–1530 by Laura Stokes

Review by: Michael D. Bailey

Source: *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (November 2012), pp. 110–111

Published by: University of California Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nr.2012.16.2.110>

Accessed: 01-11-2017 18:16 UTC

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It's interesting, fascinating, and even entertaining. The book is clearly directed to a broader audience—including, certainly, the burgeoning yoga market—but scholars, while familiar with the figures and issues in Syman's book, would also find it interesting, if lacking the depth of typical scholarly studies.

It is the latter observation that marks the greatest weakness of Syman's book. She clearly understands the philosophical backdrop of classical yoga, and she articulates it in a manner easily accessible to a lay reader. Moreover, she also has keen sociological intuitions concerning yoga's acculturation, though she tends to refrain from judgment, unlike one of my students who insisted that yoga in America shouldn't be called yoga, but 'asana practice', because it is void of the deeper assumptions driving classical yoga. Syman might have developed and strengthened her technical discussion of the philosophical and sociological issues underlying the book, while not hesitating to weigh in more strongly with an evaluation of yoga's evolution in America. Still, the book stays within itself, registering the historical mechanics by which a particular metaphysic is drained of its cosmic scope and philosophical virility by the competition in the global marketplace of ideas. To illustrate this kind of philosophical emasculation: spam filtered into my email inbox as I finished reading Syman's book; an ad from Victoria Secret flashed, "Yoga Tops and Pants in Perfect Mix and Match: Your Yoga Class Will Admire Your Coordination." Patanjali must be rolling in his grave.

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Demons of Urban Reform: Early European Witch Trials and Criminal Justice, 1430–1530. By Laura Stokes. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. viii + 235 pages. \$85.00 cloth.

Late-medieval and early-modern judicial authorities typically considered witchcraft a *crimen exceptum*, an exceptional crime so dangerous and difficult to prosecute that extraordinary measures, such as heavy-handed use of torture, were permissible. Modern scholars have often followed suit, examining witchcraft separately from other capital crimes and apart from the broader operations of criminal justice. They have noted its dual nature, encompassing both the harm attributed to *maleficium* (murder, theft, destruction of crops, impotency) and the heresy of supposed diabolism. Moreover, while "real" crimes like murder, theft, and arson continue to be prosecuted in the modern Western world, witchcraft is not, and most scholars regard it as having been an essentially imagined offense.

Laura Stokes rightly discards these divisions. Pre-modern law codes held witchcraft to be as real as any other violation. If its evidence was often wrung from the accused under torture, this was also true for other capital crimes. Moreover diabolism, while very important to the overall

construction of witchcraft and often central to the operation of major hunts, was by no means evident in all prosecutions (for Stokes, a witch is anyone accused of harming through magic, whether elements of diabolism appear or not). These moves allow her to do what has rarely been done in the capacious historiography of witchcraft, namely, set witchcraft prosecutions firmly within the larger context of judicial practice. She focuses on the formative first century of major trials, and on the cities of Basel, Lucerne, and Nuremberg, representing the southern German lands where many of the earliest trials were situated. Comparisons are tricky due to the fact that these cities differed in many ways: size, economic importance, political situation, records kept, and those that survive. Nevertheless, Stokes makes the basic point that their civic officials were both dramatically expanding the scope of their judicial authority and extending their justice over surrounding regions in this crucial period. It is in light of these developments, she argues, that the rise of witch trials must be understood.

While the variations among her three cities prevent any completely singular and simple narrative, Stokes's most basic point, familiar to students of the late-medieval/early-modern "judicial revolution," is that civic justice became more systematic and significantly harsher in these years. The fifteenth-century rise of witch trials fits easily into this paradigm, and only historians' previous fixation on likening that rise to the spread of demonological stereotypes has occluded the fact. In her first chapter, Stokes addresses previous trial scholarship focused on diabolism, which she intends to complement rather than challenge. She also illustrates how many elements of the witch-stereotype developed first at a "popular" level in rural regions, coming to the attention of city magistrates as they extended their jurisdictions into the countryside. Ultimately her argument focuses on "reforming zeal" – the growing propensity of civic officials in this period to seek to enforce moral as well as social order. Witchcraft was only one of the crimes embodying particularly heinous moral transgression that they prosecuted assiduously. Her final chapter builds an illuminating comparison between witchcraft and sodomy prosecutions.

This study offers an important new perspective on Europe's early witch trials, yet avoids any simplistic reinterpretation of their rise. Stokes points to contradictions among her three cities as often as to similarities. While in Lucerne reformist impulses caused authorities to pursue witches intensely into the sixteenth century, in Basel, she suggests, a desire to appear "merciful," as well as deep concerns about the value of judicial torture, led magistrates eventually to cease hunting witches. Viewed from this new angle, the dynamics of witch trials remain nuanced and complex.

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